What Albertans Said: On Governance Issues for the 21st Century in Alberta

Research Findings from *Inspiring Education: A Dialogue with Albertans*

InspiringEducation
A DIALOGUE WITH ALBERTANS

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Background

A series of regional community dialogues, hosted by Alberta Education in support of the *Inspiring Education: A Dialogue with Albertans* initiative, were held across the province between April and June, 2009. The outcomes for the *Inspiring Education: A Dialogue with Albertans* initiative included;

- Broader public appreciation of the importance of education in Albertans' lives, and how education is increasingly the basis of a prosperous society and economy;
- A broadly accepted long-term vision for education in Alberta; and
- A policy framework which describes the overall direction, principles and long-term goals for the delivery of education in Alberta.

To further the dialogue the Minister of Education hosted a Provincial Forum in Edmonton October 18-20, 2009. The Forum was held to further examine Albertans' views on education. Researchers Lisa Given, Ph.D., and Hedy Bach, Ph.D., were contracted by Alberta Education to conduct analysis of the data collected during the Forum.

The event featured talks by distinguished speakers, as well as facilitated round-table discussions and online contributions on relevant topics. In this discussion, participants were asked to reflect on governance issues – namely, to address the question "Who can contribute to the shared responsibility for education in the future?" The purpose of this discussion was "to explore existing roles and relationships and consider how these could be enhanced" in order to "realize the full potential of Shared Governance" (Facilitators' Guide). This discussion was intended to focus on *how* individuals can work together to achieve the goals identified during Forum discussions about policy.

This report presents analysis of the data gathered during these discussions.[1] **Bolding** is used throughout the report to highlight specific themes, examples and quotes that illustrate key concepts addressed in each section.

[1] See Appendix 1 for details on the data analysis process used to create this report.

Results of Analysis

The discussions revolved, primarily, around three key points of focus:

- individuals' current roles in contributing to governance;
- individuals' possible future roles, given the opportunity for enhanced contribution to governance, and,
- issues that will shape the success/failure of the shared governance structure.

The following sections report on results of all three areas. First, the various stakeholders who can and may contribute to governance are identified, along with a brief overview of their current and potential, future roles. Second, themes related to factors that influence the success of a shared governance structure are identified.

Primary Stakeholders' Roles in Contributing to Shared Governance

Currently, a number of stakeholders play primary roles in students' educational experiences. The participants noted that these roles must continue; however, there may be some evolution in these roles that could be achieved in the future.

Early Childhood Services – Grade 12 (ECS-12)

Teachers are on the front-line of students' experiences with education across the province. They are "facilitators of learning" and "inspiration providers for lifelong learning." Participants noted that the best teachers, at present, are those who **engage collaboratively**[2] in student learning, who **recognize and respond to students' diverse needs**, who are eager to be **creative, innovative and imaginative** in working with students, parents, community members and others involved in the educational enterprise. They educate "the entire student, fostering a love for learning, arts, music"; they also "focus on critical thinking, problem-solving, imagination, creativity, innovation, flexibility, technology use as a tool." Teachers serve as "mentors who show how to get and use good information and allow creativity." They engage in a "more free-flowing, flexible, sustained relationship with students and parents."

Participants also noted that what happens in the classroom must **reflect advances in the workplace and in postsecondary education**. To build on current successes in these areas, future initiatives must provide **support for teachers' professional education**, which could extend traditional practices of teacher education. In addition, participants noted the need for **new ways for parents, community members and others to engage with teachers** inside and outside of the classroom. Although the data do not provide concrete examples of how this type of enhanced collaboration might best be achieved, participants were very keen to see a governance model that reflects a high level of collaboration among various stakeholders alongside a respect for teachers' professional status. The Alberta Teachers' Association was mentioned as a central voice in teachers' professional commitment to student learning.

[2] **Bolding** is used throughout the report to highlight specific themes, examples and quotes that illustrate key concepts addressed in each section.

ECS-12 Students

Across the datasets, putting children at the heart of our approaches to education was described as paramount. Interestingly, however, students themselves were mentioned infrequently in the datasets in terms of their own place within the governance framework. Students' own voices were not reflected in the datasets in any great measure; where students were discussed, they were often mentioned by adults who were engaged in the forum activities. Where students' roles were addressed, participants noted that **students' responsibility for their own learning** is a key pillar in the success of educational initiatives. Participants mentioned, for example, that to be effective learners "students need to take charge of their education (i.e., attend; allocate time for studies; balance curricular and non-curricular studies)." Students need to be **involved in the decision-making processes** around curricular and extra-curricular activities, as well as assessment models of success. At present, "students learn what is prescribed to be learned in standardized ways, by standardized means. They need to measure up to someone else's terms. In contrast, we expect students to take responsibility for their education without a real opportunity to expand [their] views beyond set standards." To address participants' desire for individualized learning practices that address students' personal needs (as opposed to a standard, one-size-fits-all approach), students must be involved in educational governance. The dataset does not provide concrete examples of how best to achieve this.

Parents

Parents play key roles in shaping students' educational experiences. They "model global citizenship and all other conceptual skills." However, parents must be "involved and informed" and share "responsibility and accountability" for their children's education. Participants noted a number of areas where parents can influence, positively, students' academic successes. Many of these areas of influence occur outside of the classroom, in a student's own home or in the community. For example, participants noted the importance of **home-based support** where parents focus on improving students' study habits, guiding students in their understanding of particular areas of the curriculum (e.g., helping students to evaluate web resources), and giving students the skills to move from elementary through high school and (ultimately) into the workforce or post-secondary institutions. Here, parents "provide support to teachers in helping with materials; advocate for their child; help their children to learn and participate." Parents also "offer support in the home, encourage and teach elementary skills; [they are the] teachers of values, beliefs, respect, life skills."

In addition, parents also have an important role to play in **school-based support** by serving on school councils and in their local schools (e.g., volunteering; parent-teacher meetings, etc.). Parents often "volunteer at the school, get involved in school council, attend parent/teacher meetings." At present, parents have many opportunities to be involved in their children's education in these two arenas; however, not all parents avail themselves of these opportunities. In future, providing additional mechanisms to involve parents in various, meaningful ways would be ideal. As one participant noted, it is important that "families be included in the decision-making processes [and] create input into the education of their children through regular engagement and communication."

School Boards

At present, the Government of Alberta (through the School Act) delegates a great deal of authority for the governance of education to boards that are elected at the local level. Participants at the forum described school boards as the "connection between communities and government." The boards act as "**advocates**" for children, "**stewards**" and "**watch dogs**" for public education, and "**voices**" for parents and other members of the community at the government level. School boards were described as being responsible for providing

"opportunities for students in diverse areas" and making sure "needs are recognized." The boards need to set a "strategic plan" for education and support teachers and staff in the schools, while representing "their communities' hopes, dreams and aspirations for education."

Other forum participants described school boards as "**buffers**" between communities and government, where all three bodies have close, interconnected relationships. In other cases, school boards were described as having to take responsibility for change, though they can be **perceived as having "no real authority**." Participants noted that, increasingly, boards are being held accountable for student performance; this raised questions related to the boards' involvement in curriculum design, assessment strategies and general decision-making. As one participant noted, school boards "need to have autonomy over the funds they are allotted and less strings attached to provincial programs. [They need to] engage the public in education in their localities [and decide] how funds are allocated amongst the schools in the locality."

Overall, participants noted a need for effective, collaborative relationships between the government, school boards, schools and local communities – with school boards "at the table during critical discussions concerning educational issues." Indeed, as one participant noted, the value of school boards is of central importance in building effective relationships as "they are probably the only stakeholders who are in a position to bring stakeholder groups together."

Government

Participants also noted the central role that the Alberta Government plays in shaping educational priorities and activities. Participants described the role of government as "setting basic standards, flexible curriculum, providing funding and [to] keep up with technological changes." However, to achieve these goals, government needs the support, involvement and empowerment of parents, students, teachers and community (among other stakeholders) in shaping educational decision-making. Overall, the government was described as being "**the first organization to advocate for children's education**" and, as such, is responsible for all aspects of education, including "curriculum, standards, outcomes, measures, funding, policy... the classroom, teacher certification, teacher preparation, definition of the education system." In addressing funding structures, in particular, participants raised a number of possible alternative models to support educational initiatives. These included "corporate sponsorships and support," "collaboration with other Ministries to ensure resources are used for student success," and the need for "creative finances – with no provincial/federal tax." Overall, participants noted the need to "provide sufficient and sustainable funding to [provide] predictable support [for] the system." As one individual noted, "everyone" should be responsible for funding Alberta's schools.

Participants raised a number of **doubts about the effectiveness, efficiency, equity and accountability of public education frameworks**. Participants expressed a desire for "more local autonomy," for the education system to be "more flexible" and for the system to "encourage citizen participation and adjust [education frameworks] according to the input." Participants expressed frustration with "assessment overkill," "knee jerker" reactions to educational change, and "prescriptive rather than empowerment" models of education. They noted that there is "less accountability," at present, for what they describe as "bureaucratic processors" of education. Participants noted the importance of monitoring progress, for example, but "not just with [Provincial Achievement Tests] and department exams [but] ask the teachers, [teaching assistants]...all kinds of results." Participants noted the need to increase awareness of initiatives by education partners such as "**research on best practices**" to inform change and to employ "**facilitators to work with partners to develop and implement change**." As participants noted, government needs to "facilitate a responsive educational model" where government "listens to what the students are asking for and not what they [government] think is the best choice."

Secondary Stakeholders' Roles in Contributing to Shared Governance

In addition, participants noted that other groups play a lesser – though very important – role in shaping students' experiences. In future, governance models could take these groups into account in reviewing how they engage with the ECS-12 educational experience.

Community Members

Participants noted the importance of engaging community in educational governance. The concept of "community" was defined very broadly in the dataset, including (but not limited to): local businesses; neighbourhood organizations; Aboriginal communities; churches; health-care providers; police; and, individual members of the general public. Participants made a clear distinction between educational goals that are best achieved in the schools, between teacher and student, and those that are best achieved with **guidance from and clear connection to the community**. In some cases, community members need to **be involved in school initiatives** by, for example, bringing guests into the classroom or arranging field trips to engage with specific groups. In this way, community members have an enhanced "peer partnership" where "community members [and] teachers teach together." In others, community members can **provide learning opportunities that extend and build on the learning that happens in schools** by, for example, offering practicum placements to high school students or engaging students in charity work. As one participant noted, for example, employers should "take the responsibility to train graduates as they see fit for workplace needs."

Although participants discussed the need for a level of engagement between schools and their communities, the datasets do not provide concrete details on **what level of engagement is most appropriate**. The comments reflect a full spectrum, from community agencies and individuals being quite detached from the governance of education, to having a role that is highly connected and structured in a more formal way. In one case, for example, a participant called for legislation where "the community should have a voice in school councils and support students in their communities." Participants were keen for communities to be involved in students' education; however, **questions emerged** about who would make decisions, how equity/fairness in education would be acknowledged, how community-based learning would be assessed, etc. Participants also noted great variation in needs and intentions between urban and rural communities and their connections to their schools. Any governance framework that involves community in substantive ways must address these questions prior to implementation. As one participant noted, stakeholders' "roles and responsibilities need to be clearly defined."

Post-secondary Institutions

Participants recognized the importance of clearly defining the roles and mandates of post-secondary institutions to build a strong educational foundation that can guide the ECS-12 system. Participants noted that post-secondary institutions play a crucial role in advancing the well-being of society. They described these institutions as important "research centers" and "centers of innovations" that can "lead instructional practices" at the ECS-12 levels. As one participant noted, **post-secondary institutions can provide "research [on] best learning-delivery (teaching) styles given complexity and diversity of learners" and can "teach teachers and trainers accordingly**." Participants noted that post-secondary institutions "advise but are not accountable for ECS-12 governance"; further, they noted that "we perceive them as an 'after-effect' [of ECS-12 education] so to speak, but we need their direct input throughout the school years." Participants noted that post-secondary institutions have a key role to play in enhancing competitiveness provincially and locally.

Overall, participants described the need for "**seamless...collaborative partnerships**" between post-secondary institutions and ECS-12 stakeholder groups. They noted these groups can work together to provide a more holistic and supportive environment to help all Albertans achieve their learning objectives. Post-secondary education "needs to be able to adapt to change in entry requirements/level [and] be part of a seamless partnership with schools allowing individuals to move back and forth between post-secondary and high school." As one participant noted, post-secondary institutions could "recruit students [through] open houses, career fairs;" another noted that they could "conduct research to identify market needs, learner needs, educator needs." In this way, appropriate links can be drawn between outcomes at the ECS-12 levels and the needs of post-secondary institutions to continue with next steps in fostering lifelong learning and in making links to the "work world." Participants noted the need for "staff and students from both post-secondary and secondary institutions [to] visit/exchange ideas with one another." Indeed, the important role of post-secondary institutions in preparing future teachers and providing professional development opportunities was noted by participants. As one individual pointed out, "Those responsible for teacher preparation need to encourage [professional development] collaboration and teacher evaluation processes to ensure standards are met. Need to create awareness and understanding, a commitment for professional growth by teachers."

However, participants noted that there are **resource implications** for enhanced partnerships between post-secondary institutions and ECS-12 stakeholders. As one participant stated, such a partnership requires "more monies, grants, scholarships for deserving students who may not have the funds" to pursue post-secondary education. Here, resource allocation decisions need to consider both learner demand (i.e., the needs of ECS-12 students, as well as teacher education students) and labour market needs (i.e., the needs of employers and post-secondary institutions).

Factors that Influence the Success of a Shared Governance Structure

Shared Vision and Shared Responsibility for Education

Participants noted the importance of stakeholders sharing a common vision for education, along with sharing responsibilities for students' academic success. The key concept described here is reflected in one phrase (repeated by many participants): "It takes a village to raise a child." Many participants noted that we need a "**common vision**" for education in Alberta and that we need "**enhanced partnerships**" to achieve that vision. However, participants noted a number of challenges in realizing this dream. For example, participants noted that a number of "**silos**" exist, at present, which would need to be broken down and realigned; these include firm lines drawn between individual ministries/departments within government, as well as lines between individual schools and community agencies. As one participant noted, "Good governance implies that the players must abandon their personal agendas at the door and work together in pursuit of a common purpose. Only then will the vision truly be shared." Similarly, participants noted that for collaboration to be achieved there must be a "**willingness to collaborate**" on the part of various stakeholders. Indeed, some participants even questioned whether we need to involve everyone in a shared educational governance system; they noted that "many people in the community do not want to be engaged, they just want the job done."

Focus on Each Child's Needs

Individuals noted the importance of an individualized approach to education, which is responsive to each child's personal needs. They stated that a shared vision of education must make meeting each child's needs a common goal; here, "**the child is the common ground**." Education must be "**inclusive**" and "**diverse**," providing "**equality and opportunity**" for all students. In this way, students will become "**confident and competent learners**" who can engage with educational activities using a variety of "**learning styles**." For this vision to be achieved, individuals providing

educational opportunities must focus on "**support and scaffolding**" of students' successes. To achieve this goal, students need to be involved in the governance structure for Alberta's education system; as one participant noted, "Students are central to governance. They are the users of education." At the same time, participants noted that the "whole village [parents, teachers, government, community] needs to take part in raising/educating the children."

Curriculum Review

Participants also spoke about the need to have a "**long-term, pedagogically sound and engaging plan**" for education in Alberta. As one individual stated, "ignorance of sound pedagogy can set us (and our children) up for failure...For example, using assessment of learning to rank and sort and judge." They noted that learning is a "lifelong process" and that "critical thinking and problem solving are key skills for the future." The ECS-12 education curriculum must support a student-based focus, **where teachers can be creative and innovative** in the ways that they address students' varied learning needs. Participants noted, for example, that teachers need to "explore new ways, innovative ways of teaching." They noted the "importance of arts to students and exposure to arts," as well as "field trips (students can ride on a plane)" and "simulated games to expose students to life." Participants also noted the importance of promoting a "love of learning" and suggested the possibility of "removing grading and testing, homework removal" to focus on "intrinsic motivation." As one individual noted, in a lengthy exploration of this topic, we need to "do more comparative studies of education systems and practices on a global level and learn from them. Collaborate in developing excellent teaching models and demonstrate the effectiveness of these models. Give meaningful feedback about 'effectiveness' of the instruction they are getting. Give input about teaching methods that engage their enthusiasm and curiosity. Be more active in teaching younger peers."

However, participants noted that a "resource commitment" is needed, but also wondered if there was "enough flexibility for individualism and creativity" in the current, mandated curriculum. They wondered "What is the goal of the ECS-12 education system? Preparing students for employment or preparing students to appreciate the arts and lead a full life? Or [something else]?" Overall, participants noted that "By using available resources to generate creative thinking and learning by educators, we need to facilitate a more student learning based environment where a base education is provided to all and each will learn at his/her own pace, interest levels, and abilities." Participants also noted the importance of motivating teachers, fostering collaboration among teachers and providing continuing education opportunities (e.g., in technology; in learning about students' diverse needs; in curricular areas). One individual suggested having a "sabbatical for teachers" where they can be exposed to a range of new ideas.

Governance Rooted in the Community at the Local Level

Individuals talked, at length, about ensuring that a governance framework for education has its roots in the local community. They noted that education should "**promote schools going out to the community and the community going out to schools**." Participants used the "village" metaphor, extensively, in their discussions of the importance of multiple stakeholders being involved in the education of Alberta's children. However, very few details are provided in the data regarding how that "village" might be involved in the governance structure in Alberta. Participants questioned the place of school boards within a revised governance structure, for example, with mixed comments; some participants said they should "eliminate school boards" and others noted that "in the new governance structure there is a role for school boards." As one individual noted, "currently, governance is at the school board level. School boards are the middle men, between the ministry and teachers." Others noted that we could "use the existing systems for input into decision making; for example, school councils." Where the community, parents and other stakeholders sit within a new governance structure requires more examination. However, participants did note that "**cross-ministry collaboration is more and more essential**."

Communication

Participants also mentioned the importance of open dialogue, feedback and discussion between and among stakeholders. They noted that, at present, there are few mechanisms for involving parents, community members and others in talking about educational initiatives. Parents need to have the "**opportunity to give input**" and to "get/stay involved" in education. Some participants noted, for example, that although most schools and school districts have parent surveys they "cannot individually ask each parent for feedback." Others described the lack of communication between government and other stakeholders; as one individual stated "**MLAs are never at parent council meetings [which] would be the first step in engaging the community**."

Change Management

Alongside effective communication strategies, the success of a shared governance structure will also require that Albertans feel secure in the changes that are implemented. Some participants noted that "**no one likes change**" and expressed a general "fear" of what may occur in revisions to the education system. They noted the "potential for some discomfort" with the changes that may be implemented and noted the importance of having an "action person" to lead the change, rather than someone who will "just think about it." However, as one individual noted, **we shouldn't "resist change because of fear; mistakes are not failures, they are part of change**." Barriers to effective change management in this context include "bureaucracy, [a lack of] active buy-in, ownerships, fear, [competing] interests." As one participant noted in a lengthy discussion of this issue, effective change "**requires trust, something the government does not inspire. In order for these changes to take place there must be trust**." History has given us very little evidence that governments can be trusted. They tend to take only the parts [they want] heard and manipulate the public to believe that that is what came out of the workshop. The government will have to earn this trust and prove that they value the total input."

Analysis Summary

Overall, the dataset related to governance issues points to a number of key themes that emerged during participants' discussions at the forum. Participants identified the key roles played by primary (i.e., teachers; students; parents; school boards; government) and secondary (i.e., community members; post-secondary institutions) educational stakeholders in Alberta. Participants also identified a number of factors that influence a shared governance structure, including a shared vision and responsibility, a focus on children's needs, curriculum review, local (community-based) governance, communication and change management. It is important to note that this report documents the issues and topics raised by participants themselves. The qualitative analysis presented here is descriptive, not interpretive; therefore, the report reflects what Albertans said about educational governance issues for the 21st century.

Additional Information

The results of this data analysis were shared with Alberta Education, the *Inspiring Education* Steering Committee and relevant stakeholders engaged in *Inspiring Education: A Dialogue for Albertans*. For more information on *Inspiring Education* and the results from these dialogues, please see www.inspiringeducation.alberta.ca. The "What We Heard" section contains the summary reports and notes for the 10 public conversations held in the spring, as well as the research reports from the spring conversations and the fall forum. They can be found at the following address: http://www.inspiringeducation.alberta.ca/WhatWeHeard/tabid/94/Default.aspx.

Appendix 1: Data Analysis Process

The analysis was completed using an inductive, grounded theory approach, where core themes are identified as they emerge from the data. The individual "value" datasets were reviewed independently; then, initial emergent themes were compared across the datasets (e.g., where "fairness" was linked to "opportunity") to ensure a thorough analysis of cross-cutting themes. This type of thematic analysis allows for the identification of "core" themes (i.e., where there is a major saturation – or overwhelming agreement – on the concepts identified) and of "common" themes (i.e., minor saturation). This also allows for an analysis of anomalies – themes that are mentioned less often, but provide a glimpse into alternate views, counter-examples and individual cases. In qualitative analysis, these latter themes are examined alongside the "core" and "common" themes, to provide insight into the individualized needs of participants. Unlike quantitative analysis, these themes are not treated as "outliers" that are removed from the results; rather, these "hidden gems" often point to areas of concern, caution or positive attributes to be highlighted, particularly when results are intended to inform policy decisions.

Qualitative analysis focuses, first, on the coding and classification of themes emerging from the data. Once that work is complete, analysis can then move to a more in-depth examination of the results, including the creation of models and advanced modes of representation of the data. Researchers use a variety of methods to complete their initial analysis (of the type represented in this report). Some scholars code transcripts by hand, using physical markers (e.g., sticky notes, highlighters, organizational binders, whiteboards) to note common themes; others use computer software packages to facilitate the analysis (including Microsoft *Office* products, wikis, as well as proprietary qualitative data management software). For this project, given the timelines involved in the completion of initial analysis, *Word*'s "track changes" features were used to facilitate analysis. However, it should be noted that the intellectual work involved in the coding process is the same, regardless of the tool used to facilitate this work. As both authors of this report teach graduate-level courses in research methods and give workshops regularly on coding and analysis, the results presented here are based on the authors' expertise in these areas.

For further information on the intellectual coding process that informs this report, please see Dr. Given's award-winning paper (co-authored by Dr. Hope Olson), "Knowledge organization in research: A conceptual model for organizing data," *Library and Information Science Research* 25 (2003), 157-176 [Online at http://www.ualberta.ca/~lgiven/LISRko2003.pdf].

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